What is claimed is:

1. A system for monitoring and controlling utility-based consumption comprising:

a reader for obtaining utility consumption data from a utility meter; and

a computer system for collecting the data from the reader wherein the computer system computes a forecast of consumption for one or more predetermined periods of time and wherein the computer system signals for the control of consumption through the controlling of one or more devices that consume utility-based product based on the forecast.

2. The system according to claim 1, wherein the data is electric power consumption data.

3. The system according to claim 1, wherein the data is natural gas consumption data.

4. The system according to claim 1, wherein the data is water consumption data.

5. The system according to claim 1, wherein the forecast of consumption is based on usage for a portion of the predetermined period of time.

6. The system according to claim 1, wherein the computer system repeatedly computes the forecast.

7. The system according to claim 1, wherein the computer system signals for the control the one or more devices so that usage for the predetermined time period falls below a predetermined amount.

8. The system according to claim 7, wherein the computer system signals for the control of one or more of the devices through the decreasing of the amount of time that one or more one of the devices run.

9. The system according to claim 1, wherein one or more of the devices includes a climate control device.

10. The system according to claim 9, wherein the climate control device is an air conditioning unit.

11. The system according to claim 7, wherein the predetermined amount represents a baseline above which the cost of electricity increases.

12. The system according to claim 7, wherein the predetermined amount represents a target and when usage falls below the target for the predetermined time period the user becomes entitled to a rebate.

13. The system according to claim 1, further comprising a user interface at the computer system wherein the user interface displays indicia related to consumption to the user.

14. The system according to claim 13, wherein the indicia related to consumption is representative of historical usage.

15. The system according to claim 13, wherein the indicia related to consumption is representative of then-current usage in real time.

16. The system according to claim 15, wherein the indicia related to consumption includes a moving picture.

17. The system according to claim 16, wherein the moving picture includes a chart of usage.

18. The system according to claim 1, further comprising means for accessing the user interface from a location remote from the computer system for providing the user input.

19. The system according to claim 18, further comprising means for displaying indicia related to power consumption at the remote location.

20. The system according to claim 1, wherein the utility company sends the alerts to the computer system to reduce consumption during a crisis situation.

21. The system according to claim 1, wherein the utility company communicates with the computer system via the Internet.

22. The system according to claim 1, wherein the utility company sends the alerts to the computer system via the Internet.

23. The system according to claim 1, wherein the alerts from the utility company are based on forecasts of how much power will be consumed.

24. The system according to claim 1, wherein the utility company communicates with the computer system to obtain data on power usage for billing purposes.

25. The system according to claim 1, wherein the utility company instructs the computer system to adjust the consumption of one or more devices.

26. The system according to claim 1, wherein the reader monitors a value displayed by a seven-segment numeric indicator by monitoring the state of seven segments

associated with said indicator and determining the value displayed by said indicator by associating each value that said indicator can display with the state of each segment associated with said indicator.

27. The system according to claim 1, wherein the system includes multiple readers for reading utility consumption data from multiple meters and wherein the computer computes the forecast based on the data from multiple ones of the readers.

28. A method of monitoring and controlling utility-based consumption comprising:

reading consumption data from an utility meter using an automatic reader;

collecting the data from the reader in a computer memory device;

computing a forecast of consumption for one or more predetermined periods of time using a computer system; and

controlling an amount of consumption by the computer system signaling for the control of one or more devices that consume utility-based product based on the forecast.

29. The method according to claim 28, wherein the data is electric power consumption data.

30. The method according to claim 28, wherein the data is natural gas consumption data.

31. The method according to claim 28, wherein the data is water consumption data.

32. The method according to claim 28, wherein the forecast of consumption is based on power usage for a portion of the predetermined period of time.

33. The method according to claim 28, wherein said controlling controls the one or more devices so that usage for the predetermined time period falls below a predetermined amount.

34. The method according to claim 28, wherein the predetermined amount represents a baseline above which cost of the utility supplied product increases.

35. The method according to claim 28, wherein the predetermined amount represents a target and when usage falls below the target for the predetermined time period the user becomes entitled to a rebate.

36. The method according to claim 28, further comprising displaying indicia related to consumption.

37. The method according to claim 36, wherein the indicia related to consumption is representative of historical usage.

38. The method according to claim 36, wherein the indicia related to consumption is representative of then-current usage in real time.

39. The method according to claim 38, wherein the indicia related to consumption includes a moving picture.

40. The method according to claim 39, wherein the moving picture includes a chart of usage.

41. The system according to claim 28, wherein the utility company sends the alerts to the computer system to reduce power consumption during a crisis situation.

42. The system according to claim 28, wherein the utility company communicates with the computer system via the Internet.

43. The system according to claim 28, wherein the utility company sends the alerts to the computer system via the Internet.

44. The system according to claim 28, wherein the alerts from the utility company are based on forecasts of consumption.

45. The system according to claim 28, wherein the utility company communicates with the computer system to obtain data on power usage for billing purposes.

46. The system according to claim 28, wherein the utility company instructs the computer system to adjust the consumption of one or more devices.

47. The system according to claim 28, wherein the reader, monitors a value displayed by a seven-segment numeric indicator by monitoring the state of seven segments associated with said indicator and determining the value displayed by said indicator by associating each value that said indicator can display with the state of each segment associated with said indicator.

48. The system according to claim 28, wherein said controlling comprises adjusting a thermostat to provide additional cooling during a non-peak use period leading up to a peak use period and further adjusts the thermostat to provide lesser cooling during the peak use period.

49. The system according to claim 28, wherein said controlling comprises adjusting the use of one or more devices according to at least one calculated formula agreed to between the consumer and the utility.

50. A system for monitoring and controlling power consumption comprising:

one or more readers for obtaining power consumption data from one or more electric utility meters; and

a computer system for collecting the data from the one or more readers wherein the computer system makes forecasts of electric power consumption based on the data and signals for the control of power consumption by controlling one or more devices that consume electricity.

51. The system according to claim 50, wherein the computer system is located at the utility company.

52. The system according to claim 50, wherein the computer system repeatedly computes the forecast.

53. The system according to claim 50, wherein the computer system controls one or more devices so that usage falls below a predetermined amount.

54. The system according to claim 50, further comprising a user interface at the computer system wherein the user interface displays indicia related to power consumption to the user.

55. The system according to claim 54, further comprising means for accessing the user interface from a location remote from the computer system for providing the user input.

56. The system according to claim 50, wherein the utility company sends alerts to the computer system to reduce power consumption during a crisis situation.

57. The system according to claim 50, wherein the utility company communicates with the computer system to obtain data on power usage for billing purposes.

58. The system according to claim 50, wherein the utility company instructs the computer system to adjust the consumption of one or more devices.

59. The system according to claim 50, wherein the reader, monitors a value displayed by a seven-segment numeric indicator by monitoring the state of seven segments associated with said indicator and determining the value displayed by said indicator by associating each value that said indicator can display with the state of each segment associated with said indicator.

60. A method for monitoring the value displayed by a segmented numeric indicator, comprising:

monitoring the state of segments associated with said indicator; and

determining a value displayed by said indicator by associating each value that said indicator displays with the state of each monitored segment.

61. The method according to claim 60, wherein a plurality of segmented indicators together indicate a present utility consumption.

62. The method according to claim 60, wherein the state of six segments are monitored and one segment is not monitored, wherein said one segment is selected from the group of segments consisting of: a top-right segment, a bottom-right segment, a bottom segment, a bottom-left segment and a top-left segment.

63. The method according to claim 60, wherein the state of five segments are monitored and a bottom segment and one other segment is not monitored, and wherein the said one other segment is selected from the group consisting of: a top-right segment and a bottom-right segment.

64. The method according to claim 60, wherein the states of the segments are monitored by an optical sensor.

65. The method according to claim 60, wherein the states of the segments are monitored by a detector selected from the group of detectors consisting of a two-dimensional array of detectors and multiple linear array detectors.

66. A method for monitoring the value displayed by a segmented numeric indicator, comprising:

monitoring the state of five segments associated with said indicator wherein the five segments are not a bottom segment and one other segment and wherein the said one other segment is selected from the group consisting of: a top-right segment and a bottom-right segment; and

determining a value displayed by said indicator by associating each value that said indicator displays with the state of each monitored segment.

67. A method for monitoring the value displayed by a segmented numeric indicator of a utility meter, comprising:

obtaining data by optically monitoring a plurality of segmented indicators which together indicate a present utility consumption; and

determining a value displayed by said indicator by performing optical character recognition on the obtained data.

68. The method according to claim 67, wherein the plurality of segmented indicators are optically monitored by an integrated array of optical sensors.